

Bread, circuses and *The Hunger Games*

Emily Rose Nabney

A classical education has long been seen as useful: here it helps us get to grips with the best-selling *Hunger Games* series.

What do *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins's best-selling trilogy of dystopian Young Adult novels have to do with the world of the Greeks and Romans? Lots! Although the action takes place not in the past but in a distant future, it is set in a country divided into twelve districts (an echo perhaps of the 14 regions of Augustan Rome), all ruled by an oppressive, totalitarian city called the Capitol (after the Capitoline Hill and its temple). The governing city is populated by people with classically inspired names – Caesar Flickerman, Octavia, Portia, Plutarch Heavensbee. Already these links lend a prestige and decadence to the culture. The citizens of District 2 have similar names (Cato, Brutus, Enobia), underlining how it is favoured by the Capitol and had 'swallowed the Capitol's propaganda more easily'. They are also more brutal than usual when taking part in the Hunger Games, something which we assume they learned from their rulers. Not only does Cato promise to kill the heroine; Brutus, a former winner, 'can't wait to get back to the amphitheatre'.

Bread and circuses

The country in which these events unravel used to be called North America, but has been renamed Panem, the Latin word for 'bread' and a reference to the Roman poet and satirist Juvenal's expression, *panem et circenses*. Juvenal wrote:

'Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, ... now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses.'

The implication is that they had sacrificed their political power for cheap food and mass entertainment, and that this was being exploited by wily politicians. It is an idea that Collins finds particularly attractive. In the final novel, a Capitol citizen

named Plutarch explains the concept of 'Bread and Circuses' to the heroine Katniss who is made to realize that 'that's what the districts are for. To provide the bread and the circuses'. Each district has a speciality, and is required to provide food and other materials to maintain the Capitol's dissolute lifestyle. As in ancient Rome, the general population is kept well fed and content, which makes them reluctant to intervene in political life or question the decisions of the people in power.

The districts also supply the *circenses* in the form of 'the ultimate entertainment: the Hunger Games'. The titular games are an annual event when one boy and girl from each district are selected to participate in a fight to the death. The whole event is televised as the bloody spectacle of watching teenagers scrap for their lives fulfils the Capitol's need for entertainment. This 'entertainment' finds its justification in the Roman sport of gladiatorial games.

Gladiatorial games

In Rome, gladiatorial games were exciting and violent shows watched by all levels of society, just as everyone in Panem, from the richest citizens in the Capitol to the poorest people in the districts, is compelled to watch the Hunger Games. The people selected to be gladiators in Roman times came from diverse but usually lowly backgrounds. They could be enemy soldiers who had surrendered and allowed themselves to be captured or criminals condemned for theft, arson, or treason. All Roman gladiators were slaves, and therefore among the lowest classes of society. The same can be said of the competitors in the Hunger Games, who are often among the poorest and most vulnerable members of their districts. This explains to some extent why the audience in both cases is able to view the violence as entertainment – the competitors were of such low status as to appear to be almost sub-human.

Before competing, novice Roman gladiators (or *novicii*) were educated by teachers of different fighting styles under harsh conditions. Contestants in the Hunger Games undergo similar preparation before going to the arena. They are taken to a Training Centre to learn skills, both of combat and survival. After all, the less fit and skilled the competitors, the less exciting the games. In the Hunger Games, the contestants from each district are segregated while being trained, as gladiators were. In both cases, this was to prevent friendship or loyalty from developing, which might encourage them to conspire with each other and impede their enthusiasm for sticking the knife in.

In Roman times, many gladiators died untimely, brutal deaths, either from injuries received from fighting or being killed at the sponsor's command after being defeated. However, some successful gladiators were adored by the public and could become celebrities, sex-symbols even. Some past winners (or 'Victors') of the Hunger Games achieved similar status, particularly the character Finnick Odair who is considered 'something of a living legend' because of his stunning good looks. We are told that ever since he won the sixty-fifth Hunger Game, 'the Capitol have been drooling over him'.

As well as echoing the celebrity status of ancient Roman gladiators, Finnick also emulates their fighting style: he comes from the fishing district and wins the Games after receiving a trident, which was 'a natural, deadly extension of his arm'. He then 'wove a net out of some kind of vine' and 'used it to entangle his opponents so he could spear them with a trident'. It is a technique that resembles that of the *retiarius*, a type of gladiator equipped with a trident and net. The influence of gladiatorial shows on the Hunger Games helps to create the novel's tense and threatening atmosphere.

Theseus and the Minotaur

As well as entertaining the masses, the Hunger Games fulfil a more sinister function. Instigated after the districts tried and failed to rebel against the Capitol, the Games were meant as a brutal reminder of

the Capitol's power and a way of sowing dissent by pitting the districts against each other. Children died, while parents watched from the sidelines. This idea of punishing parents by publicly killing their children is not new: it can be traced back to the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, discussed already by Ian Repath. Crete defeats Athens and then demands that seven Athenian boys and girls be sacrificed to the part man, part bull. Collins heard the story as a child and was deeply impressed by it--'Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: 'Mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you. We'll kill your children.'"' Indeed her series can be seen as a futuristic reinterpretation of the story. Like the Athenian children, the districts' children are effectively sacrificed -- selected (or 'reaped') at random and forced to take part. This idea is strengthened by her decision to call them 'tributes' rather than 'contestants'.

But *The Hunger Games* and the Theseus myth share something bigger. They explore what happens when characters defy the system that oppresses them. Theseus does this by killing the Minotaur, the monster whose appetite has been oppressing the Athenians. He also escapes from the labyrinth, something the Cretans considered impossible. In the act of slaying the Minotaur, civilized Greek culture triumphs. In *The Hunger Games*, in contrast, there is no such consolation -- when one tribute kills another, this act only reinforces the Capitol's power. 'Who wins?' asks the heroine, Katniss. 'Not us. Not the districts. Always the Capitol.' Instead, the real act of defiance comes from a seemingly simple action, but one with an unprecedented impact on the balance of power. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, only Katniss and another tribute are still standing. Instead of fighting to the death, as they are expected to, Katniss provides a different solution. She proposes that they both eat poisoned berries and rob the Capitol of their Victor. This forces the Gamemakers, who control the arena, to declare both of them Victors.

Spartacus

Katniss's action is interpreted in a variety of ways -- as 'love', 'refusal to give in under impossible odds', 'defiance of the Capitol's inhumanity'. But whatever the intention, the proposal comes as a refusal to play by the Capitol's rules. It renders her a symbol of rebellion for the districts, drawing parallels with Spartacus, a real-life historical figure, who went from slave to gladiator, and then became the face of an uprising against Rome. Her defiance is filmed and broadcast on Panem's television sets to encourage others to insurrection.

Spartacus' revolution was unsuccessful: he was killed in battle in 71 B.C. and 6000 of his allies crucified so as to deter would-be revolutionaries. Katniss also pays a high price for being a figurehead of uprising. Some of her closest family and friends are killed in the war and she herself is left traumatized by the violence and cruelty she has experienced. Although the revolution has succeeded, the author still hints that the new order might not be an improvement on the Capitol. The new president proposes to 'have a final, symbolic Hunger Games, using children directly related to' members of the Capitol government. Suzanne Collins was influenced by the loss and ultimate futility of Spartacus' story, and uses it to improve the authenticity and realism of her novels, rather than give her characters a conventional happy ending.

Ancient myth and history have a great influence on *The Hunger Games*. The novels offer political and social commentary, as well as being exciting page-turners. Knowledge of Rome and its amphitheatres, Theseus, and Spartacus enriches the reader's understanding and enjoyment of the series.

Emily took English, Theatre Studies, Classical Civilization, and Art for A Level and has just started a course in Film and Literature at Warwick University.